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RUEHVS/ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANILA 001063

SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP/MTS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/18/2019
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [MOPS](#) [PTER](#) [PINR](#) [KISL](#) [RP](#)
SUBJECT: MINDANAO VIOLENCE RISING

REF: A. MANILA 985:ICRC HOSTAGE
[1](#)B. MANILA 192:JOINT PHILIPPINE OPERATION NABS
TERRORIST

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Larry Memmott, reasons 1.4 (b),(d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: The progress the Philippine military has achieved against insurgents and terrorists in Mindanao (ref B) and the Sulu Archipelago has slowed significantly in the last four months, and kidnappings and high-profile attacks have been on the rise. A Philippine hostage abducted April 25 by Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) terrorists on Basilan Island was beheaded over the weekend. Meanwhile, International Committee of the Red Cross worker Eugenio Vagni passed the four-month mark as an ASG hostage. The ASG is also suspected of carrying out assassination attempts against the Sulu governor May 13 and a Philippine police senior official May [1](#)7. Despite these setbacks, the Philippine military continues to chart successes in its efforts to secure Mindanao, including the May 17 surrender of 57 Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) fighters. The increased violence coincides with a stalemate in the peace process between the Philippine government and the MILF. Major changes in Philippine armed forces leadership may also have disrupted the military's rhythm against terrorist and insurgent groups in Mindanao.
END SUMMARY.

HIGH PROFILE ATTACKS

[1](#)2. (C) The consistent progress the Philippine military was having against insurgents and terrorists in Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago (ref B) has slowed in the last four months and kidnappings and high-profile attacks have been on the rise. The terrorist Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) has been behind much of the violence, abducting Filipinos and foreigners, and conducting assaults on both elected and security officials. Philippine police reported May 18 that the severed head of Filipino hostage Doroteo Gonzales, abducted by the ASG on April 25, was delivered to their offices in Lamitan, Basilan after his family reportedly was unable to raise a ransom. Philippine officials speculate the brutal act may have been meant as a message to the families of other kidnap victims to pay their ransoms or have their family members suffer similar fates. Meanwhile, Philippine officials have been frustrated in their attempts to secure the release of Italian Eugenio Vagni, the remaining International Committee for the Red Cross worker who has been held hostage by the ASG since January 15 on Jolo Island (ref A). Sources report that Vagni's health continues to deteriorate even as Philippine troops continue their search for him.

13. (C) Elected officials, along with police and military, have also been targeted in the recent attacks. Both the ASG and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front Special Operations Group (MILF-SOG) are suspected to be involved in various attacks, although there is no information to suggest a coordinated approach to the incidents, which have occurred in Central Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago. The MILF-SOG, under Abdul Basit Usman, ambushed an AFP brigade commander's convoy in early May and then attempted to assassinate former Maguindanao Provincial Governor and power broker Andal Ampatuan May 15 using improvised explosive devices (IEDs). Separately, the ASG, led by Albader Parad and others, ambushed and killed a Philippine National Police senior superintendent and three others May 7 and then attacked the convoy of Sulu Governor Abdelsakur Tan May 13 with multiple IEDs. Combined Philippine operations in the past have disrupted efforts by the ASG and MILF-SOG to link forces (ref B), and at this time the attacks appear unrelated.

UNCERTAINTY IN AFP?

14. (C) Personnel changes in the Armed Forces of the Philippines may have contributed to a deceleration in the AFP's momentum against the ASG and rogue MILF Forces. In April, AFP Chief of Staff General Alexander Yano resigned a month early and was named Ambassador to Brunei. His successor, Lieutenant General Victor Ibrado, is widely expected to hold the position only until next May, when a strong supporter of President Arroyo, LTG Delfin Bangit,

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would take over the military's top spot. Bangit replaced Ibrado as commander of the Philippine Army earlier this month. In the southern Philippines, Western Mindanao Commander Lieutenant General Nelson Allaga has announced he will retire from the military and pursue a career in politics, while the AFP commander on Jolo, Major General Juancho Sabban is in line to be the next Commandant of the Philippine Marine Corps. The personnel picture is further clouded by the anticipated official announcement from Secretary of National Defense Gilberto Teodoro that he will run in the 2010 presidential elections, a decision that will require him to resign immediately. Nonetheless, the AFP has continued its pressure on rogue MILF commanders in Mindanao with success, as evidenced by the surrender of 57 MILF fighters and their weapons on May 17.

PEACE PROCESS AT A STANDSTILL

15. (C) Compounding the bureaucratic uncertainty in the Armed Forces and Department of National Defense is the apparent inability of the Philippine government and MILF to re-engage in peace talks, which have been frozen since a Philippine Supreme Court ruling in August 2008 invalidated a memorandum of agreement between the government and MILF on ancestral domain. Both sides publicly have stated their commitment to pursue a workable solution, but there has been little, if any, movement on the subject over the last eight months.

COMMENT

16. (C) The recent high-profile attacks in the southern Philippines suggest the ASG and MILF-SOG have been emboldened by their kidnapping successes. Despite releasing two of the Red Cross hostages under earlier government pressure, the ASG continues to hold Vagni, the only one of the Red Cross hostages who exhibited health problems, perhaps in hope of receiving a ransom payment. With the commanders at Western Mindanao Command and on Jolo Island planning for their

immediate futures, it appears that the ASG and MILF-SOG are seizing the opportunity to roil the already turbulent waters.

The AFP needs to demonstrate a firm, measured approach -- as they have done in the past two years -- to shore up the hard-won gains they have made against the ASG and other lawless groups in the southern Philippines. At the same time, demonstrable action by the Arroyo administration to restart the peace process with the MILF would offer the hope of broader political stability for Mindanao.

Memmott